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Insight into Design

The low cost of setting up her interior design school was “the beauty of Hong Kong,” says French interior designer Eve Mercier.

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French designer Eve Mercier opened her school in Hong Kong in 2014 to tap the growing demand for interior design

and potential clients to explore the kind of training needed. The result was a variety of courses, both in duration and content, which focus on creating high quality and attractive interiors while also keeping an eye on costs.

French designer Eve Mercier opened Insight School of Interior Design in Hong Kong last year, two years after returning to the city. “When I came back to Hong Kong, I looked at the interior design scene and saw that there were many projects in Hong Kong and in the region, but there were too few properly trained interior designers who could tackle the projects,” says Ms Mercier, who previously worked for London-based interior design firm Candy & Candy and later set up Eve Mercier Interiors.

“There was clearly a need and a strong interest. I had a clear idea of what needed to be done and where people are frustrated.” Ms Mercier’s instinct proved correct. In just under a year, her Chai Wan-based school has welcomed some 200 students and her business is growing steadily.

Before launching her business last February, Ms Mercier spent two years speaking with architects, interior designers

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The Long and Short of It

Courses range from one- to two-day classes to longer diploma programmes. Short courses are subject-specific, ranging from small-space design to an introduction to free-hand sketching. Part-time programmes focus on introductions to interior design and residential and commercial interiors. There is also a one-year diploma programme geared towards those looking for a career in interior design. The result, Ms Mercier says, is an offering that is flexible and customisable to her clients' goals.

All courses are based on real-case studies, which Ms Mercier believes is essential to the training. Past examples include designing a show flat in Shanghai, while some current students are working on designing an exhibition booth for fashion label Shanghai Tang.

"I think it's important to reach a broad audience," Ms Mercier says. "There are some people who are just interested in interior design, others who are working and not ready to jump ship, and then you have some people from day one who know that they want to focus in interior design."

Course tutors and instructors are all practitioners in the field, while the school also welcomes visiting mentors, including Bruno Moinard, who previously worked with Cartier, Chateau Latour and Galeries Lafayette, and Douglas Young, founder of Hong Kong lifestyle store G.O.D.



The Chai Wan-based school, to date, has enrolled some 200 students

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Business of Design



All courses are based on real-case studies, including designing a show flat or a fashion exhibition booth

looking for a place; it took about six months,” Ms Mercier says. “I wanted a place with some character. I didn’t want to be in a high-rise. I wanted light and with a view.”

Eventually, Ms Mercier settled on a 4,000-square-foot space in Chai Wan on Hong Kong Island, a neighbourhood she liked for its art and industrial feel, but one she also felt was an up-and-coming area. Renovations came next.

“When I got there, there were 20 cubicles and fake windows, and completely renovating the place in three months was a little challenging,” Ms Mercier said. “We created a whole new space, one with light and a nice environment to learn in.”

According to Ms Mercier, the low cost of setting up a business in Hong Kong was “the beauty of Hong Kong” and a definite advantage in getting started. Apart from the investment in the school’s premises, Ms Mercier said other recurring costs involve staffing expenses for a good accountant and auditor, as well as a reliable assistant, fluent in English, Cantonese and Mandarin. But finding a space for the school proved to be a major challenge.

“I was probably a bit naïve when I began looking for a place; it took about six months,” Ms Mercier says. “I wanted a place with some character. I didn’t want to be in a high-rise. I wanted light and with a view.”

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International Outlook

With a client base that includes businesses such as eco-furniture boutique Tree which sends employees to Insight for training, Ms Mercier says she has broken even on her initial investment. In the beginning, Ms Mercier says that the mix of students was weighted towards the expatriate community, but she has since seen a shift towards more local students, who now comprise about half of her customer base. Insight also hosts students from across Asia, including Singapore, Indonesia and Taiwan. The diverse student mix, Ms Mercier says, benefits the school.

“It’s great to see the students feeding off each other and learning from other students,” Ms Mercier said. “I think we’ve created a good dynamic. The courses are quite tough, but it’s an exciting environment.”

Ms Mercier has her sights set on online expansion later this summer, and additional locations abroad in future.

“In five years I’d like to have a school in Shanghai and an English-language school in Paris,” Ms Mercier said. “In Paris, there is so much knowledge but not enough in English. I see the three schools as creating a triangle, where there could be a curriculum involving each of the three schools. I think this would benefit everyone.”

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